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## IS THE MODERN CRITICAL THEORY OF THE SERVANT IN ISAIAH 52:13—53 SUBVERSIVE OF ITS NEW TESTAMENT APPLICATION TO CHRIST?

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*Erroneous Messianic interpretation of Old Testament;—the usual Christian view.—Modern critical view of Isa. 40—66;—Product of exilic writers;—Isa. 52:13—53 an idealization of the past and the future;—a picture of the martyr congregation, finding its fullest realization in Christ.*

IN the discussion of this subject we must understand the difference between the use of Old Testament Scripture in the time of Christ and its use according to the principles of scientific exegesis. Both Jews and Christians used the Old Testament in a way we would not use it now. Both Jews and Christians reckoned passages as Messianic which cannot pass the test of criticism as such.<sup>1</sup>

No Christian scholar can doubt that Christ is the haven of Old Testament prophecy and history. He was the port to which the Old Testament church was sailing. The Old Testament is to a certain extent the logbook, which indicates a devious course and many tempestuous seas in Israel's religious history. The Old Testament testifies of Christ in its underlying purpose. It was a new world which lay before Old Testament priest, prophet and lawgiver, as new as that which greeted

<sup>1</sup> For examples of passages which Jews erroneously reckoned as Messianic see Buxtorfi Lexicon Chaldaicum Talmudicum et Rabbinicum, Basiliæ 1640, Col. 1268—1273, Gen. 35:21; 49:1; Ex. 12:42; 40:9; Num. 23:21; Deut. 25:19; Cant. 8:1, 2, 4; Ruth 1:1; Eccles. 1:11. The comment on the last passage: “Cum generationibus quæ erunt in diebus regis Messiae” shows how the Rabbis construed such passages as Messianic. Not less fanciful in Christian interpretation, Justin Martyr reckons Gen. 49:11 as a direct prediction that Jesus should ride on an ass' colt; he claims that the rods placed by Jacob in the water-troughs are types of the wood of the cross, that the hands of Moses stretched out during the battle with Amalek signified the cross. In Psalm 22:12 he says the Pharisees are the bulls.

the eyes of Columbus. The purpose of the Old Testament worthies in their quest and their view of what they should find was as inadequate as the hope of that early voyager to find a new way to the East Indies. A false exegesis of such a passage as the words of Christ, "Abraham rejoiced to see my day; and he saw it, and was glad" (John 8:56), has led multitudes to speculate on the wonderful views that Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, and others had of Christ. Of the existence of such views there is no evidence. Isaiah's conception of the child that was to be born, of the son that was to be given, was of one who was to see the light in his own day, and who was to deliver from the Assyrian oppression (*cf.* Isa. 9:4 with Mic. 5:4-6).

It was natural when Christ opened the eyes of the disciples to the Old Testament as full of his Messiahship (Luke 24:27) that their attention should be more fully directed to these superficial features in the Old Testament. Trained in the Jewish use of Scripture it was next to impossible for them to free themselves from a Jewish interpretation of passages regarding the Messiah. Writing for Jewish Christians it was needful that they should employ a line of argument that should approve itself to them. So it was natural enough that the author of Matthew's gospel reading Hosea's reference to Israelitish history: "When Israel was a child then I loved him and called my son out of Egypt" (Hosea 11:1), should find in it a prediction of the return of Jesus from Egypt (Matt. 2:15) and meditating on the fact that Christ was born in Nazareth should by false etymology, perhaps, find some connection between Isaiah's use of the word *nētzer* for sprout (11:1) and Nazarene and so should quote a prophecy which we nowhere find: "And [he] came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets that he should be called a Nazarene" (Matt. 2:23): or that through a lapse of memory, unless we have a clerical error, as Toy suggests, should see in the purchase of the potter's field a fulfilment of a prophetic utterance which he attributes to Jeremiah (Matt. 27:9), but which rather belongs to Zechariah (11:13). Thus mere verbal coincidences between words in the Old Testament and words or

acts in the New were considered as prediction and fulfilment, although the word prediction is never used in our English Bible.

There are, however, other passages which seem to be exact photographs of Christ's sufferings on the cross and which may be directly applied to him with less violence to the context than in the passages indicated. This is notably the case in Psalm 22:6-18 and the section we have under consideration. The correspondence is so close that it is difficult for the ordinary Christian reader to escape the conclusion that the details of Christ's sufferings and death are explicitly foretold. There is no portion of the Old Testament which contains more of the heart of the gospel than the one before us. Written, as it were, under the shadow of the cross it has a hold on our reverent affection which we can assign to nothing else in the Old Testament. The old school of exegetes consider it a direct prophecy of the sufferings and exaltation of Jesus Christ, as an illustration of one of those Scriptures whose significance, as Peter says, the prophets sought to fathom (1 Peter 1:10-12). This theory, however, of a direct and primary prediction of the sufferings of Christ is contrary to the modern view of the Old Testament which regards it as part of a book, recording the instruction and experience of the Hebrew people. When Moses and his successors legislated it was primarily for a contemporary people; when David and the Psalmist sung, they first sang out of their own experience and that of their contemporaries; when Amos and Isaiah prophesied, it was to the men of their own time, not to some far-away congregation, just as Christ certainly spoke to his disciples, and Paul and John to particular churches. We have sometimes seemed to think (with reverence be it spoken) that God had to be tied up to a Moses, a David and Isaiah, as if he could not find other instruments as fit through whom to reveal his will. It is true that David and the psalmists, singing out of human experience, sang for all time, because human experience is fundamentally the same in all ages. They, as well as the prophets, present ideals, portraits which were never realized until Christ came. Hanging in the

Old Testament gallery, New Testament children in knowledge give the testimonial to their accuracy and their divine authorship when they say: "It is the Christ." Such a result does not come from natural development. God is in it. These idealized characters are proofs that the "True Light" which lighteth every man was coming into the world" (John 1a, R. V. Marg.). Israel was seeking a deliverer, a Messiah, and God was constantly clarifying, enlarging, and idealizing their conception. A historical and critical study of the Old Testament may destroy, or may confirm, the startling coincidences between Old Testament and New Testament Scriptures, but it cannot fail to show that God is in the entire Old Testament preparing the way for the coming of his Son. This view is far better for the Christian scholarship of the nineteenth century than the more childlike representation of Messianic prophecy among Jews and Christians down to the present century.

According to the modern critical view Isa. 52:13—53 is the consummation of the teaching in Second Isaiah regarding the Servant of Jehovah. This is a constituent part of a book by one or more authors who began to write for the Babylonian exiles as early as 546 or 540 B. C. and, in case of a manifold authorship toward which some critics are now tending, was not finished before the time of Ezra or even later. Isaiah, then, is not regarded in this prophecy as being transported by the spirit to a congregation 150 years away, when God might find a prophet or prophets laboring among them to utter his message. The situation is just as historical as when Paul writes to the Corinthians. Second Isaiah just as truly has a motive as the epistle to the Corinthians. Even those critics who consider the book a symposium find in it substantial unity of plan and purpose. It is largely addressed to exiles in Babylon. It is designed to comfort them and prepare them for their return and to set before them their divine mission. It is written with celestial eloquence. Earth and heaven mingle in such a way as to make many Christians literalist interpreters feel that, as the things described are predictions which have never been fulfilled, therefore they wait fulfilment. On the other hand some, like Kuenen, see in them

the evidence that there is no supernatural prediction, as that term is commonly understood, for after all these magnificent prophecies the reality was sufficiently poor and mean to show that the prophet had moved in the sphere of ideality. He had thrilled and stimulated the people by great expectations. Winged and thinking to reach the sun, they found themselves fallen bruised and almost dead on the earth. But we shall see that the human and divine meet in these prophecies, the real and the ideal, the present and the remote, the servant and the Christ, the Jew and the Babylonian exile, and perhaps the Jew of the time yet to come, who shall mourn his blindness and rejection of the Servant for centuries (Zech. 12:10). It is actual history with which we have to do. The flower of the southern kingdom has been in exile for years. Some have prospered and are as much attached to Babylonia as their ancestors were to the leeks and onions of ancient Egypt. They are the worldly liberal party (46:8, 2; 48:22). They desire no better country than the rich, alluvial plains between the Tigris and the Euphrates. We may believe that they treated the proposition to return to Jerusalem with arrogance and contempt (51:7, *cf.* 66:5, which George Adam Smith, Cheyne, and Duhm place after the return). But among them are true Israelites who have never ceased to mourn for Jerusalem and to miss the temple (63:18; 66:10). They have been diligent students of their ancient Scriptures. They have watched and waited for the fulfilment of the promise of their return, until the days seemed long and the nights comfortless and they have lifted the despairing cry: "The Lord hath forgotten me" (49:14). His answer comes through the prophet: "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people" (40:1), "Why, sayest thou, O Jacob, and speakest, O Israel, my way is hid from the Lord, and my judgment is passed over from my God?" (40:27). He gives them the assurance of safe convoy to their own land (vss. 3-11).

What, may we suppose, was the ideal of these Jews who wished to return? We may believe, as far as we have any light regarding the period, that it was to restore their state and their worship on the old foundations. All their misfortunes were

attributed by their prophetic writers to their disobedience of God; in their idolatry, in their formalism, and later in their neglect of the right forms of worship. Preparations must have been made for the reorganization of the state. Failure had come from disobedience of the divine Tora, Mosaic and prophetic. The result, as we may believe, was a tremendous literary activity during the exile in Babylon. Priests and Levites had become scribes. The Mosaic laws, written and traditional, all that was believed to represent the earliest as well as the latest usage, were carefully gathered and collated, the history of Israel based on documentary sources was rewritten, as seen from the standpoint particularly of the Deuteronomist, with a religious end in view; prophetic books were also gathered; collections of hymns were doubtless in process of being formed. The ideal of the Jewish people who were ready to return to their own land was a state of which Jerusalem should be the capital, where the temple should be set up, where the legitimate worship should be restored, and where descendants of David, or a second David, should reign (Jer. 23:5; 33:17; Ezek. 34:23-25). The people were to live in themselves and for themselves, although strangers among them were to be treated as the home-born. God's idea as made known through Second Isaiah is infinitely larger, but it joins on to previous teaching, experience, and revelation; and in this way grows up the doctrine of the servant. All Israel by virtue of being the seed of Abraham, God's elect and God's lover (Isa. 41:8), is his servant, not because all are really so, but because the prophet is dealing with generalities and these the people can best understand. No reflecting Israelite in the exile would deny that Israel, above all other nations, was favored as God's body servant, hence was in close, intimate relations, and had nothing to fear (43:1; 44:2). Others might tremble at the progress of the dread conqueror Cyrus (41:5), also called God's servant, but his favorite servant, Israel, need not tremble, need not look about as if there were no helper (vs. 10). Hence this relationship meant protection, meant favor, meant a sure return to their own land. This was a message that would receive general assent.

But when the servant was settled in his own land, then what? Was his life simply to be self-centered, cut off from other nations? No. He was not merely to restore the lost tribes of Israel, but he was to be God's missionary to the ends of the earth, that the Gentiles might share in the blessings promised to Israel (49:5-6). Not all Israel are capable of this mission when the prophet regards them. The servant labors for Israel, the part labor for the whole, the reformers, the spiritually-minded, labor for the cold, dead church. Thus the idea of the servant is limited to the pious in Israel (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 4-9). But the servant of Jehovah as set forth in 52:13, and 53 is not a new invention, though he receives a new name. He has long existed in Israelitish history down to the time of the prophet. No individual floats before the mind of the prophet, but the whole succession of martyr prophets and confessors, past and future, become in his mind a compound picture of one person, although idealized and heightened above any actual experience by the divine Spirit. In this respect in second Isaiah's prophecy, as in all other prophecies, the ideal is far beyond the actual.

The subject is the servant; the events narrated are viewed as already past, but they are indissolubly mingled with predictions of the future; there are two distinct classes, the Gentiles in the last part of the fifty-second chapter and the Jews in the fifty-third. The Gentiles are amazed at the exaltation of the servant. Because his appearance was such that they had no suspicion of his real character. They are startled and shut their mouths at him in surprise. Nevertheless when they hear they accept. The scene changes: it, as well as the person, is ideal. The prophet listens to the penitent musings of Israel over the treatment of the servant, who, as I have said, is thought by some critics to represent the personalized and idealized history of the martyr prophets. It is a time of national awakening to the true character and services of these men, as thus idealized in the experiences of one sufferer. With shame and repentance they give the reasons for their rejection: "Who believed our preaching?" they say, or that which was preached to us, for he did not appear

with any of the insignia of the divine favor. He was like a poor sickly sucker, parched by the sun, and having no moisture from the ground. He had not any of those manly elements which at once impress the people, for he was without any physical attractiveness. If he was conspicuous for anything, it was in his being sorrowful and sickly, so that all faces were averted from him, as if he had been a leper, and so in his being despised, and of no one at all pondering his true mission. We never dreamed that this poor wretch, from whom we turned away in disgust, was bearing our sicknesses and staggering under our pains; for always believing that a great sufferer must be a great sinner we thought God was visiting on him the punishment of his own sins; but now we see that he was run through on account of our transgressions, crushed on account of our sins, that the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and that by his stripes we have been healed. Although like sheep we have all gone astray, each turning to his own way, the Lord caused to light on him the iniquity of us all. Smitten and afflicted he did not utter a murmur. He was like a poor helpless lamb brought unresistingly to the slaughter, and, like a ewe lying on the ground to be sheared, and not even bleating, so he did not open his mouth. So far from suffering for his own crimes, it was through an oppressive judgment that he was taken away, but we were so blinded that who of his contemporaries considered that he was cut off from the land of the living, that he was smitten for the transgression of my people? Even when dead he was treated like a criminal, for they buried him with the wicked and with those who deserved to suffer for their ill-gotten wealth,<sup>1</sup> although like these he had not been guilty of any violence or deception. While this was our treatment of him, it was in accordance with God's plan, he was pleased to crush him, to make him sick. All this the prophet sees as past, all these sufferings and this death he sees as vicarious, but we are transferred to the future. For in this idealized picture the past and the future are blended, the Great Sufferer of New Testament history, unrecognized by the prophet, colors the whole picture and makes it even in its Old

<sup>1</sup>The reading, as George Adam Smith remarks, is doubtful.

Testament setting a superhuman portrait of vicarious suffering and of victory. If we consider that we have here simply the idealized sufferings of the martyr congregation, then we may be tempted with Duham to do violence to the text, but if this ideal servant, in accordance with the nature of other prophecies in Isaiah, looks forward into the distant future as well as backward, then we do not think of tautology when we read, "When his soul shall make a guilt-offering, he shall see a seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hands. Through the travail of his soul he shall see satisfactorily, by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, justify many, because he shall bear their iniquities, therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and with the strong he shall divide the spoil, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors and he bare the sins of many, and was making intercession for the transgressors."

The essential element in the modern critical theory of this passage, whether as referring to the martyr congregation, or to an idealized person, is of a picture which has its motive and coloring in the Old Testament. But critics like Dillmann, Cheyne, and Driver do not deny its New Testament application. Indeed, this cannot be denied, whatever may be our theory as to its origin, for we see that all that is said in this chapter fits Jesus Christ a great deal more closely than it does the martyr congregation in Babylon, or the succession of confessors among the prophets. The result is the same, although we get at it in a different way. The traditional theory considers it a direct portrait of Jesus Christ, a prediction that we may trace in the fulfilment almost word for word; the evangelical modern critical theory maintains that it is an Old Testament picture, which bears a startling likeness to Christ and finds its fullest realization in him. In one case we have prediction and fulfilment, in the other we have prefiguration<sup>1</sup> and fulfilment. Under either

<sup>1</sup> As has been remarked, our English Bible does not contain the word prediction, although it may be said to imply it. A study of the work and office of the prophet shows that he had a much larger function than foretelling future events. The term is well defined in the Century dictionary. The divine power which enabled the prophet

theory it is certain this chapter could not have been written if Christ had not been coming into the world. He and his kingdom are not merely foretold in certain passages, but he and his kingdom are the goal of Old Testament law, prophecy, and history. If we were to take everything that might come as literal prediction in the Old Testament, and seek for literal fulfilment in the New and in history, we should find many difficulties. We should have only a New Jerusalem painted in Jewish colors; but if we take not merely isolated passages, but the whole Old Testament, we shall find indeed—while the predictive element is not eliminated—that we shall not be driven to forced conceits, or to a Jewish millennium, in our anxiety to justify the details of the grand outlines and the splendid coloring of the Old Testament. The details are not the picture, the coloring is not the picture, although details and coloring make it. The image left on our mind is the picture. Ezekiel's temple was never built, nor need we expect it will be. The glorious predictions of Second Isaiah were never literally fulfilled, nor need we believe that they will be. They nerved the Babylonian exiles and guided their footsteps, like the star which the Magi saw in the East, to their holy city, and they still inspire God's people and will not cease to do so until their highest promises and brightest pictures have been exhausted in the glorious consummation which lies before them.

thus to prefigure the main elements in the sufferings, death, and exaltation of Jesus Christ is of the same sort as that which would enable him to predict the same things. Practically it is a different way of accounting for the same phenomenon, and a different term for the same thing, for such prefiguration is not the result of natural, but of supernatural, causes.